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Travis County DA Releases Strategy to Reduce the Number of Overdose Related Deaths in Travis County

*District Attorney Partners with Local Officials, Community-Based Organizations, and
Music Industry Leaders to Raise Awareness.*

TRAVIS COUNTY, TX -- In 2020, over 240 Travis County residents lost their lives to a drug overdose. This is a 30 percent increase compared to 2019 and the second leading cause of accidental death in the year 2020.

Nationally, more than 100,000 Americans died of an overdose as the pandemic spread between April 2020 and April 2021, according to figures from the National Center for Health Statistics [published in a recent New York Times article](#).

In response to the high drug overdose rates, Travis County District Attorney Jose Garza and local officials released the community-based strategy to treat substance use disorders as a public health issue and reduce the number of overdose-related deaths. The plan involves three components:

1. Raising awareness;
2. Providing life-saving drugs and training to vulnerable communities;
3. Ensuring that appropriate resources and policies are available to support a community-based response and pursuing policy change.

“It is the responsibility of the District Attorney to prevent harm in our community before it happens,” said Travis County District Attorney José Garza. “I am grateful to all of our partners for committing to harm prevention in our community and for working to address the stigma facing people suffering from substance use disorder. We know that we must treat substance use disorder and overdoses in our community as a public health issue, and that doing so will make our community more safe.”

“As overdose deaths hit a record high this past year in our county and across the country, we must do everything we can to address this as the public health crisis that it is,” said Travis County Judge Andy Brown. “Every overdose death is tragic, but we absolutely can take steps to prevent them. Together we can make our community safer and save lives.”

“The pandemic has increased instability across the country and right here in Travis County,” said County Attorney Delia Garza. “It has brought with it a rising number of overdose related deaths. By coming together on this issue, we can fight the stigma facing people who struggle with substance use disorder in our community and save lives.”

"Last year, drug related overdoses increased by 30% in Travis County and were one of the leading causes of death in our community," said Texas State Representative Gina Hinojosa. "While these losses are devastating, I find solace in the fact that overdose related deaths are preventable through proven public health approaches. I look forward to continuing our work with Travis County officials on this critical issue by promoting real solutions at the state level, such as increasing access to education, training, and treatment."

"We've all seen the sobering data on the significant increase in overdose deaths nationally, and, unfortunately, right here in Austin," said Texas State Representative Donna Howard. "Thankfully, our local community is coming together to address this public health crisis. I stand ready to support them and to assist with any efforts at the state level that will facilitate the critical and life-saving use of intervention and prevention tools, such as fentanyl testing strips, so that we can prevent these tragic deaths and work toward efforts of recovery."

Keeping with the prior administration's policy, the District Attorney's office has declined to prosecute small amounts of narcotics, however, the office under this administration has included an exception to this policy when law enforcement believes that failure to arrest would be a threat to public safety.

In addition, local safety officials, public health organizations, and music industry leaders signed a letter of support for this strategy.

To raise awareness, part of the efforts includes partnering with local non-profits Red River Cultural District and the SIMS Foundation to organize a free multi-venue music event called "Safer Together: Overdose Prevention & Harm Reduction Saves Lives" on December 4th, 2021.

Organizers will donate all funds raised from the event to the SIMS Foundation, whose mission is to help reduce substance use issues while supporting and enhancing the well-being of the music community at large.

To support the effort, the District Attorney's Office has pledged over \$15,000 from its discretionary fund to SIMS. Additionally, earlier this year the Travis County Commissioners Court allocated \$250,000 in the FY22 budget for life-saving methadone and medication assisted treatment to help address the opioid epidemic.

The Harm Reduction Strategy report and sign-on letter are available on the District Attorney's website [here](#).

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